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PURITY RULES IN PENTECOSTAL UGANDA. TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS OF RELATIONAL RULEWORK

ABSTRACT

Rules concerning romantic relationships and sex—what we term 'purity rules'—are central to Pentecostalism in Uganda. In public church arenas, the born-again variant of the rules laid down during Uganda's 'ABC' response to HIV/AIDS — 'abstain till marriage and be faithful once you marry'—are presented as clear and non-negotiable. Yet in church members' lives, and in their conversations with each other or in small church groups, space is often created for interpretation and deliberation about the officially strict rules. In this article, we use ethnographic material from fieldwork in urban Pentecostal churches in Uganda to describe how rules work on people, and people work on rules. We describe this process of relational 'rulework' as taking place at the nexus of an individual's relationship to the church, to small groups at the church, and to God. The dynamics of rulework become particularly evident at occasions where rules are transgressed, or where the nature of the rules—and thus of possible transgression—is questioned. Three central axes of rulework can be identified: first, the (claimed) transgressor's position in church hierarchy; second, the level of publicity at which their transgression is made known to others; and third, their relationship to God. Approaching rules as objects of anthropological analysis foregrounds how what Morgan Clarke (2015) has called the 'ruliness' of religious traditions, and what we describe as the messiness of religious adherents' lives, exist in parallel with each other. Where 'ruliness' and 'messiness' interact is where rulework takes place and where it can most productively be ethnographically observed.

Keywords: Morality, ethics, religion, sex, transgression

INTRODUCTION

Weekly cell meetings are a vital aspect in the organization of most Pentecostal congregations in Uganda. In these occasions, groups of approximately ten members gather to pray together, to discuss specific topics prompted by the church, and to share problems, hopes, and plans in a convivial spirit. The ideal cell becomes a group on which members can rely and where it is possible to talk about and receive advice on even the most intimate subjects. In many

churches, cell groups operate alongside gender-specific classes and short courses, all of which function as key locations for what we term 'rulework': in this case, deliberating the rules that guide born-again Ugandans' beliefs and behaviours concerning relationships and sex. Such rules – which we refer to in this article as (sexual) purity rules – are central to Ugandan Pentecostalism, in which, indeed, purity 'rules'. To abstain from sex before marriage, to be faithful to one's spouse, and to speak, dress, and carry oneself in a way that does not lead (either oneself or others) to temptation, are key tenets of born-again churches' public teaching, and how church members distinguish themselves from others. Purity is not just what is expected of believers; it is promoted as the cool and sexy thing to aspire to, particularly in those churches that integrate what we describe as the idea of 'purity rules!' firmly into their aesthetic (see Obadare 2017). Even then, the apparently clear rules—abstain before marriage and be faithful once you do—are not set in stone: rules work on believers, and believers work on rules, through complex relations between the believers, the church, its small groups, and God. Moments at which this becomes most clear are when rules are transgressed, or when debate is opened as to whether or not transgression has taken place. These are the focus of the case studies we present in this article.

One church known for its emphasis on purity rules is 'Blessed Assurance'[2], an English-speaking Ugandan Pentecostal church which particularly targets young urban adults and members of the middle- and upper-classes. During one of the church's cell meetings on a university campus, Rose asked other group members what was wrong with her. Why wasn't she able to find a 'decent man'—someone who is faithful and committed to the relationship and to a future marriage? Rose was a 25-year-old

woman with a good job as a bank clerk, and she very much wanted to start a family. After two failed relationships, she was now dating a man who was born-again and hard-working, and who she had felt was 'the right one'. The couple were planning to get married the following year, but Rose had discovered her fiancé had cheated on her. She confessed to the group that she felt disheartened: if even a born-again man behaved in this way, who could she trust?

After Rose had finished describing her situation, a discussion started among cell members. Rose had known most of the members since she joined the church, and the cell, in her first year on campus. Most of the ten members of the cell vocally asserted Rose should immediately break up with the man, as cheating was totally unacceptable in any relationship. The key words in these arguments were trust and purity: Rose said she was still pure, so how could she trust a man who cheated on her, knowing that she was committed to pre-marriage abstinence? Yet, three of the ten members of the cell tried to soften this first reaction of their peers. They asked Rose whether she was sure about the cheating, since they had known and trusted the man—a 'serious guy'—for a long time. In this light, one of them concluded—'maybe it was just a mistake from his side'. Thus, while no one doubted the requirement of pre-marriage abstinence, some members introduced nuance to the conversation, suggesting that Rose might not need permanently lose her trust, as the case would be were the rule-breaking reflective of the man's inherently bad character.

In this paper, we draw from our observation of members' deliberations in the public church arena, alongside more nuanced deliberations in one-on-one discussions, and in cell groups like that of Rose, to highlight the relational and non-static nature of purity rules in Pentecostal Christianity. Rules about sexual conduct

before and during marriage have been clearly articulated by Ugandan Pentecostal churches following the Ugandan government's 'ABC' (*Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms*) strategy for combating the spread of AIDS. For Pentecostals, the 'ABC' turned out to be an 'AB-only' strategy, with a strong focus on abstinence campaigns targeting young people. The rules spelled out in the AB strategy—'abstain' for singles, and 'be faithful' for marrieds, are seen as elaborations of the Ten Commandment's prohibition on adultery. As shown in previous research, strict rules on sexual purity have been one of the cornerstones of identity building for the Pentecostal movement in East Africa (Boyd 2015; Gusman 2013; D. S. Parsitau 2009; Valois 2014). In these churches' public self-representation, rules concerning abstinence and faithfulness are rigid and no exceptions are allowed. Yet, in small group meetings and one-on-one conversations, church members' discourses are more nuanced, and recognize the various reasons that make it difficult to keep oneself 'pure': delayed marriages or the difficulty of resisting temptations in particular life situations, such as single parenthood. Such arguments introduce complexity to the apparently simple rule encapsulated by the 'AB-only' strategy: 'Abstain until marriage and be faithful after you get married'.

There is, thus, a distinct difference between the rigid 'ruliness' (Clarke 2015) of official Pentecostal discourse on sexuality, and the way in which people reflect on it, in light of their everyday experience, when in groups smaller than the whole church. The collective and public level is the one of formal teaching and of the project of 'redemptive citizenship' (Marshall 2014). At this level, strictly following religious rules functions as a central part of self-representation and collective identity among Ugandan born-again. Transgressing

rules imposed by the church, especially when it comes to sexuality and the body of the believers (deemed sacred as the temple of the Holy Spirit), is considered an abomination, and often the consequence of possession by evil spirits. Thus, because of both the spiritual gravity of rule-breaking, and the centrality of certain rules to how Pentecostal churches differentiate themselves from what are often described as 'worldly' non-believers or mainline Christians, the consequences of their transgressions can lead to the purification of the group through the expelling of those deemed to be sinful members, as in one of the case studies we report in this article.

In contrast to the public level, where rules are the starting point, at the small group level the starting point is, rather, the everyday moral experience of the participants: this is the level of relational rulework. Even when the discussion starts from formal teachings, as it often does in guided cell or small group conversations, and although rules are often presented in such discussions as non-negotiable, particularly by group leaders, group discussions typically reflect an understanding of morality as lying, in Webb Keane's terms, in the interstices of everyday activity (Keane 2014). From this starting point, space is often made for flexibility, and even for rules to be enabling, rather than only coercive. Our analysis of the small group level demonstrates Clarke's (in this special issue) assertion that rules are not opposed to morality, and rather than curtailing, they can function as enabling and prospective: as guidelines for the project of the (wo)man to be.

What we thus propose is to consider peoples' navigation of rules as taking place in the intersection of different relationship: that between the individual and the church, between the individual and the small church groups of which they are a member, and between

the individual and God. The degree to which Pentecostal believers feel compelled or enabled to openly reflect on rules is structured by the nature of the relations in which rules are brought up for discussion: for instance, how well people know each other, how much they trust each other, and how much the community is invested in the maintenance of particular rules (or the impression that they are maintained). Believers' perspectives on rules are also moulded by their relationship with God, and their understanding of whether the church's rules are equal to 'God's rules', and which one should follow in situations where these rules appear to be in conflict. Differentiating between these relations enables us to differentiate how rules work, and how people work with them.

In sum, we propose the concept of 'rulework' to describe the way in which, through normative deliberations and the voicing of certainties and doubts, the rules of 'purity' are worked upon as goals to aspire towards in the future or made to work as means for judgement for actions in the past. Rulework, we hold, is relational, and can be conceptualised as taking place through interrelated negotiations and processes on three different axes. The first axis concerns *hierarchy*: that is, how high in the hierarchy of the church the transgressor is. The second axis refers to the *publicity of revelation*: that is, who the (claimed) transgression of rules is revealed to. Finally, the third axis connotes the (claimed) transgressor's *relationship to God*—an axis that Pentecostal Ugandans routinely argue to be more pronounced in born-again contexts, in which the believer's unmediated personal relationship to God and his Holy Spirit are highlighted, than in mainline Christian churches. Indeed, these three axes are not cut off from each other. Rather, as our case studies will show, they affect each other in complex ways. In different cases, some axes will be more important than others.

The outcomes of rulework in particular cases— the way in which people work on rules, and rules work on people—can thus be very different depending on the particularities of the situation. When rulework concerns an individual person, that person's *body*, and the degree to which the perceived transgression affects the body and is visible in it, must also be acknowledged as a central site for rulework.

We proceed by first providing a contextualizing overview of Pentecostal churches' influence on debates about sexuality in Uganda. We then present two case studies from urban Pentecostal churches, which highlight the different levels at which Pentecostal rulework takes place. Through the two cases, we show how born-again Christians work with rules, at times perpetuating the churches' public rules, at other times inviting and provoking reflection on them. Following the cases, we aim to provide a comparative analysis of them, and to elaborate on how our analysis contributes to greater understanding of religious rules.

PENTECOSTALISM AND SEXUALITY IN UGANDA AND BEYOND

Uganda is often described as one of the most religious countries in the world, largely due to the notable growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) since 1986, when the incumbent president Yoweri Museveni took power and lifted the earlier ban on PCCs. In part following the public health crisis of and moral panic caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Boyd 2015; Christiansen 2011; Gusman 2009; Gusman 2017), PCCs have in recent decades been particularly visibly engaged in public debates about sexuality, gender, and the family. Uganda's traditional Catholic and Anglican churches have tended to comment

on these themes in fairly circumscribed ways (Ward 2015), with most of their effort historically focused on upholding monogamy as the ideal for Christian marriage (Vähäkangas 2004; Peterson 2006). In contrast, in Uganda, as elsewhere in Africa, PCCs have introduced new and 'modern' lexicons for discussing sexuality in church spaces: from public commentary of hard porn that feeds into hate speech (Klinken and Zebracki 2016), to the rhetoric of 'romance' and practices of marriage counselling (van Dijk 2013; van Dijk 2015). This 'pentecostalization' of the public sphere, combined with competition on the religious marketplace, has also pushed mainline churches to adopt new styles of preaching and practice (Bompani 2016; Alava, Amito and Lawrence 2022).

To an important degree, these public debates are about rules, and the degree to which the rules religious communities ascribe for their members should be reflected in the laws of the state. As Sylvia Tamale shows, the emphasis by religious, customary, and statutory jurisprudences in Africa on public morality has largely converged in an affirmation of 'patriarchal-capitalist sexual moral standards' (Tamale 2014: 157), whereby '[t]hey dictate rules that govern marriage, divorce, adultery, transactional sex, incestuous sex, dress codes, and so forth' (ibid.: 161). In Uganda, churches have played a prominent role in debates about the long-pending marriage and divorce bill (Larok 2013), the so-called anti-gay bill (Nyanzi 2015; Ward 2015), and a bill on pornography, which triggered national debate, among other things, around a topic common to many church settings: the appropriate length of women's skirts (Guma 2015).

Researchers and journalists have documented the propagation of anti-gay laws in Uganda and other countries in the region as extensions of the global culture wars (Epprecht

2013). Yet while the publicity around the international lobbying related to these laws may be novel, the pattern behind them is not. Rather, as shown by scholars of culture and society (Lewis 2011; Ndjio 2013), as well as by African feminist theologians (see e.g. Dube 2007; Gunda 2010; Hinga 2017) the evangelization of Africa by white missionaries has always placed emphasis on transforming the rules that govern sexuality and family so as to 'save' Africans from their 'evil ways'. While this critique is vital, it is also important to note that even those who have formally converted to Christianity have resisted, circumvented and adapted religious rules to suit their own life situations (Burchardt 2011; Alava 2017; Van Klinken 2019).

That churches have tried, but rarely succeeded, in getting their followers to follow purity rules is true historically, and as our case studies reflect, it continues to be true today. Yet our case studies *also* show that there is a notable difference between the contemporary Christian scene in Africa and that of the past: whereas, for instance, the Catholic Church in Uganda has always struggled, and continues to struggle, with its members' unwillingness to subscribe to the church's marriage rules, the struggle is intensified in Pentecostal contexts. This is because the forms typically taken by Pentecostal communities—churches' division into small and regularly meeting cell-groups, and the commonplaceness of gender-specific groups set up for the explicit purpose of controlling one's sexual behaviour (van Klinken 2013)—serve to bring pressure and control down from the pulpit and into the intimate circles of peer support, friendship, and family (Gusman 2009). While similar small groups also exist in mainline Ugandan churches, it is most often within the context of their charismatic revivals, where the distinction between 'mainline' and 'Pentecostal' is blurry.

Together, such social forms and the rhetorics and visuals surrounding Pentecostal sexual education contribute towards the cultivation of a specific Pentecostal habitus, wherein the born-again subject's bodily practices (and their control) become part of not only salvation, but of expressing a 'saved' and rule-bound self, which is distinguished from un-saved and sexually unruly peers (D. Parsitau and van Klinken 2018). Often, such spiritual distinctions reference broader distinctions concerning style, 'modernity', and ultimately, social class. Moore (2016) has shown how actors committed to transnational feminist agendas in Uganda cultivate a modern bodily habitus for girls, through an emphasis on self-care and the shedding of patriarchal gender practices such as bridewealth or kneeling for one's partner, as is the customary way for wives to greet their husbands in most parts of Uganda. Interestingly, a similar cultivation of bodily care and self-esteem is used in Pentecostal Ugandan churches to advance what could be regarded as patriarchal values, such as submission to one's partner and following traditional marriage with a Christian one.

What is vital to note is that Pentecostal churches in Uganda as elsewhere are not a uniform category, but rather highly diverse, both in their formal theological teaching and how that teaching is contextualised for particular class and geographic contexts (Gabaitse 2020: 116). Such contextual specificities have great bearing on what kinds of rules Pentecostal churches proclaim, and what means they adopt in attempting to ensure adherence among members. What is equally important to note are the subtle changes taking place within Ugandan Christianity and public debate. Looking back at our over decade-long research on different forms of Christianity in Uganda, we claim that a trajectory can be traced, from the initial creation

of moral panics concerning HIV and perceived moral corruption from the 1990s to the 2010s, to a recent normalization of the new rules these panics established. This normalization can be read as the next step in what Bompani and Brown (2014) poignantly defined as the 'pentecostalization' of the Ugandan public sphere. At the turn of the 2020s, the heated public debates and outrage of the early 2000s have largely been replaced by a wide-spread public consensus on how good Christians *should* behave, and particular rules about sexuality have become part of the naturalized self-understanding of Pentecostal communities. We argue, however, that while most Pentecostal churches in Uganda present a strict stance on purity rules, members can easily continue participating in the churches, even as they choose to navigate the rules in their own ways. Some small Pentecostal churches in Africa have adopted an affirming approach to sexuality, and challenge the heteropatriarchal and often violently condemnatory Pentecostal mainstream (Van Klinken 2019). Yet more common are churches where sanctions for breaking purity rules are harsh—particularly for those in prominent positions. We now turn to an example of one such church.

BOB AND STELLA: RULE-BREAKING, CONFESSION, AND PUNISHMENT

The first case study, from fieldwork Alessandro conducted at 'God Saves' church, shows the importance of the apparatus of confession in Pentecostal congregations, and provides an insight into what submission to the church's rules means for its members. Public confession of one's transgressions—what in the Christian lexicon are defined as sins—is a common practice in Pentecostal congregations, and there is usually a space for these confessional

practices during Sunday church services. This public performance usually follows standardized narratives, with the individuals first looking back at their past, to confess their sinful thoughts or behaviours, and then moving to a projection into the future, to ask God and the congregation to help them be strong and resist the temptation to sin, i.e. to break the rules. People usually provide detailed accounts of their immoral behaviours, relying on tropes and a shared moral language that shapes this narrative form (Robbins 2007). Together with conversion narratives, these confessional narratives contribute to building the Pentecostal subject (Pype 2011), while at the same time—due to their public nature—producing forms of intersubjectivity and reinforcing the feeling of a common belonging to a group of 'brothers and sisters in Christ'. A core aspect of confessing is that, on the one hand, it highlights the always present risk of failing in the effort to follow the rules and fall back into what are considered immoral behaviours; on the other hand, it reinforces the relational aspect of rules, as it shows the will to adhere to and reproduce the rule-work proposed by the congregation and the importance of being together with the other members of the group in order to do so.

Pentecostal confessional narratives often contain a reference to the realm of darkness, with details of how evil forces operated in the life of the one confessing; this provides the listeners with an account of what happens in the spiritual world, while keeping a safe distance from it (Meyer 1995). Because the body is the site of sexual sin, the realm of darkness is particularly threatening for those who transgress purity rules. In the wake of HIV/AIDS, Ugandan Pentecostal worlds have been replete with sexualised evil spirits—spirits of STDs, promiscuity, or pornography. A central part of rulework around purity rules concerns

deliberation over whether it is the evil spirits who are to blame for transgression, or whether transgression invites malign spiritual forces into the fallen believer.

The first case study we present revolves around the story of Bob and Stella, a couple in their late twenties. They were part of the same congregation and became a couple after meeting at church two years before. At the time of the episode we narrate, they were planning to get married within a few months. They had already gone through a formal engagement at church and were just waiting to collect enough money to pay for the wedding, mainly by taking up a collection with the members of the church itself. Unlike Blessed Assurance, this is a small to medium size congregation (300–400 members), with a strong focus on university students (and young people in general) and on sexual purity. The self-representation of the church is one of a group of young people engaged in promoting abstinence in schools and within the campus. Bob himself was one of the 'ambassadors' in this campaign and so had a prominent position within the congregation.

During a Sunday service, Bob and Stella asked to take the stage. After greeting the congregation and introducing their speech with a prayer, they started to confess that Stella was almost three months pregnant. Suddenly, the happy atmosphere in the audience turned to uneasiness and surprise. Church members appeared to be astonished by this confession and, after some chaotic moments, the main pastor took the microphone and said the couple had betrayed the congregation and their own promises, and that he and the restricted group of the church leaders needed to have an urgent meeting to decide what to do about this case.

Alessandro was not admitted to the meeting, but his interlocutors who attended it told him about what took place: a long

discussion started, during which some of the leaders claimed that because of the high reputation Bob had in the congregation, and considering that they were going to marry soon, they could solve the situation by asking the couple to marry as soon as possible, before the pregnancy became evident. Yet others pushed to expel the couple from the congregation, saying that this case would have been a danger for the image, the reputation, and the mission of the church ('How can we preach abstinence to young people if one of our most active members wasn't able to abstain himself?'). Yet another critical point in the discussion was obedience—submission to a shared rule, which is strongly emphasised in Pentecostal moral discourse—and what breaking a rule means. This last point was a central concern for some of the church members, and something that went beyond (although included) mere apprehension for the impact such a case could have on the reputation of the church.

We might wonder why Bob and Stella decided to publicly confess they had not been able to keep the promise of 'purity' (abstain until marriage), knowing that this confession would raise harsh criticism, even more so because of the leadership position Bob had in the church. Although the couple was aware of the implications of their confession, they did not expect this to lead to their expulsion from the congregation. After all, wasn't it common to hear at church, during confession sessions, that 'God forgives his children', and that confession was aimed to purify the person and help leave 'immoral behaviours' behind? Repentance and forgiveness are two pillars of the practice of confession, so why in this case was forgiveness not granted to the couple? We believe the question can be interpreted in light of what we have called the different relational dimensions of rules—hierarchy, publicity, and relationship

to God—and the way in which these axes intersect in the particular body of the believer.

We can begin by considering the dimension of the relationship between believers and God. Pentecostal teaching sets out a standard procedure for instances of rule-breaking, which Bob and Stella followed: a grave transgression must be publicly confessed, particularly when it concerns a church leader such as Bob, someone who is expected to be a moral role model. After confession, you may be granted forgiveness, and start afresh. From our observation, Bob and Stella appear to have expected that their relationship to God, who is described as the forgiving saviour and redeemer of sins, would carry them through their crisis. What they perhaps did not take into account were the other, human, aspects of relationality that structured the dramatic fallout of their public confession.

Indeed, the second relational axis of rulework—hierarchy—matters greatly in this case. As mentioned, Bob had a leadership position within the congregation. As one of the leaders of the youth group and the pro-abstinence campaign organized by the church, he often taught at men's groups, youth camps, and spiritual retreats about the importance of personal growth in self-control and of becoming an example for other young men within and outside the group of the born-again. Teaching in these contexts often focused on the need for young male believers to follow the abstinence rule to be both physically 'safe' from AIDS and spiritually 'saved'. Physical safety and spiritual salvation were often linked in this form of gendered teaching, as abstaining from sex was seen as the epitome of resisting devilish temptations, which, in the Pentecostal view, can lead not only to physical death due to sickness, but also to spiritual perdition. In the Pentecostal construction of the good Christian subject, this ability to control oneself in sexuality, alcohol

consumption, smoking, and so on is considered central to becoming a 'real man', someone who works hard and runs a house properly.

The third axis—publicity (revealing/concealing)—is linked to, but also distinct from the first. In Bob and Stella's case, the gravity of the confession was compounded by its taking place in a public arena and, crucially, by the fact that the church's pastors had not known about its content in advance. From our observation of similar cases in other contexts, it appears likely that had the confession been first made to a smaller group, a less dramatic solution to the problem may well have been found. In small groups, there is more space for discussing controversial issues than in the public arena of the church, where leaders are tasked with responding to confession in a way that upholds the rules most central to the churches' public image. Indeed, public confession is an exemplification of the dialectic of concealing and revealing in rulework. When people confess publicly that they have transgressed a rule, what is at stake is not just an individual's singular transgression, but rather a moment of relational rule-work. What leads to confession is the crossing of a line between what can be concealed and personally dealt with and what requires some level of public address. In Stella's case, the pregnancy could no longer be dealt with since it could be seen. In other cases, confession can be prompted by a sense of losing control of one's life; addictions are a typical example. Transgressing rules is seen to open the door to demonic forces, whereas confession and the purification it allows seals off this door, and, ideally, allows for God to regain control over the confessing believer's life.

Finally, what appears from the above account is that, in Bob and Stella's case, the body was absolutely central to the outcome of the relational rulework. On the one hand, the body played a pronounced role because of the way in which Pentecostal teaching emphasises the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. In Bob and Stella's case, not only were their bodies seen to have been desecrated by pre-marital sex, what is perhaps even more important in terms of the dynamics of visibility, hierarchy, and the subsequent impossibility of concealment, is the fact that this particular claimed desecration was to become visibly perceivable in Stella's pregnant body.

FAITH: RULEWORK, RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MESSINESS OF LIFE

If the case of Bob and Stella is something of an archetype of what happens when religious rules are strict and punishment for breaking them is harsh, the case of Faith tells us a different story of how Pentecostal Ugandans navigate their churches' rules concerning sexuality. In Bob and Stella's case, the rule of sexual purity and pre-marital abstinence was harshly enforced – through expulsion – once the couple publicly confessed their rule-breaking. In contrast, Faith did not speak of her personal life or possible rule-breaking in the small church group she attended. Rather, she used the space of the group, as well as her relationship with Henni, to reflect on purity rules in themselves: what the rules actually are, whether it is the church's or God's rules that count, whether all rules apply equally to everyone, and whether following them is realistic. The way in which Faith presented her relationship was profoundly influenced by who she was interacting with, what her relationship was to them, and the emphasis they placed on rule-adherence. This section of the article thus extends our argument about the relationality of religious rules, showing how the interrelated aspects of revealing/concealing, hierarchy,

publicity, and the believer's relation to God unfold in a case that is a mirror opposite to the one described above. By considering rules in their relational context, we can see how individual believers navigate religious rules at the intersection of the church's public teaching, the steering and counselling taking place in small groups, and the believers' personal and direct relationship with God.

Faith was a single mother in her forties. After leaving an abusive long-term partner, she was born again, and has since become an avid member of 'Blessed assurance'—a church where purity rules are a constant focus. In the church's teaching, sex is likened to fire: it can warm and nourish a marriage, but also destroy you, and it is rules that help keep the fire in the service of its God-given purpose. Henni met Faith at 'Heavenly tastes', a women's cooking course arranged by the church as part of its women's ministry. The course reflected both the church's concern with purity rules and its affluence-affirming aesthetic: participants were promised that by attending this course they would learn to cook 'Western' restaurant food—meatballs, cookies, guacamole, and chicken nuggets, while also learning about how to be and become 'godly women'. The weekly 'Heavenly tastes' groups, which were hosted in a member's home, paired cooking with conversation about the theme of the day: kindness, loving your husband and children, submission, purity, and hospitality.

At the first session Faith attended, participants were asked to share whether they were 'married or single, since for a Christian there is nothing in-between'. Participants were then asked either – if they were married – to share what had attracted them to their husbands, or – if they were single—to share whether they 'had a crush' on anyone. The assumption that everyone was either married or single structured this particular group's conversation, and reflected the teaching of many Sunday sermons, that in God's eyes, there was no 'complicated' or 'in-between' relationship status. Yet through the interviews with 'Heavenly tastes' attendees, it became clear that the purportedly non-existent 'in-between' was exactly where most attendees were: divorced, cohabiting, or dating and having sex with little hope of marriage, either because their partner did not want to commit, or was already married. The two groups Henni personally attended were very different in this regard, largely because of the different ways in which group members, particularly the group hosts, presented themselves and partook in conversation. In one group, the host gave a lot of space to other people's views, and did not 'correct' what others said, even if they disagreed with formal church teaching. Subsequently, as group members got to know each other, the messiness of people's realities—the everyday in which they navigated the 'rules'—gradually became a central topic of conversation. In contrast, in Faith's group, the host and a number of other group members maintained a very rule-oriented tone in all conversations: whenever any disagreements about rules were voiced, the 'right' interpretation was quickly restored as the claimed consensus. At this group, almost all of the messiness of everyday life – including Faith's romantic relationship—was hidden from view.

At the time Henni and Faith met, Faith was hoping to marry a man called Derrick, which Henni learned after bumping into Faith when she was waiting for him. The next time they met at 'Heavenly Tastes', however, Faith drew Henni aside to whisper that she didn't want others to know about Derrick. In conversations held two years after the course concluded, Faith said that she did not tell other group members about Derrick both because she did not yet know them well enough, and because it would have been embarrassing if things didn't work out. Yet

we believe there is more at stake in the way not only Faith but many 'Heavenly tastes' members withheld from the group the relationship situations they were actually in. By hiding how 'messy' it was to navigate purity rules in everyday life, members were avoiding friction, and helping smooth down group conversations. They were maintaining the sense that the purity rules that were being discussed, the rules that enabled 'Godly womanhood', were clear and shared. Yet, friction was at times introduced—occasionally even by Faith.

At a session with the explicit theme of 'purity', a married member of the group, Grace, launched into a long lament about how few Christian couples kept themselves pure before marriage. Eventually, Faith interrupted by asking, 'What is purity for someone who is a single parent? Like can someone not be wanting to have sex, and be normal?' Grace appeared flummoxed by the question, but eventually said that 'If someone is really rooted in the Holy Spirit, really rooted in God, like really seriously, then they should ask God for guidance. Either God has a husband in mind for them, or then God will give them the strength to withstand temptation and remain pure.' After numerous affirmative responses from other group members, Faith persisted: 'For me, I am a grown woman, a mother. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find someone who would marry me. Yet I am a human being.' Instead of anyone responding to Faith's raising the issue of 'humanness', the group shifted the conversation to generational curses as the possible spiritual causes for singleness. By the time of the closing prayer, all doubts about what the purity rules were had been smoothed down. As they headed out together, Faith told Henni what she thought about the conversation, specifically, about the rules of purity that were evoked:

They are not being honest. They say all this thing about purity, singles, and married people. But they are not there! Really if you look around in church, there are so many who are not, they are cohabiting, or they are not able to do what they wish they were doing, following God's word. You see, if you look in the Bible, there is no ring there. Marriage there is a spoken thing, it says a man shall leave his parents and join with his wife, and they become one flesh, and what God has brought together, let no man break apart.

The statement reflected a movement witnessed many times in conversations with Faith, one we suggest is central to Pentecostal rule-work: first, evoking a rule as clear, but observing that it is rarely followed; then questioning its clarity. To understand our interpretation of Faith's statement, it is crucial to understand that in Pentecostal language, the notion of 'God's word' typically evokes either God's *rules* or his *promises*. To 'follow God's words' is thus the Pentecostal equivalent of 'following the rules', particularly in what Ngong (2020: 209) describes as the 'Pentecostal biblical perspective that sees the Bible as the Word of God that should be followed rather than interpreted'.

In the statement quoted above, Faith does three parallel things. First, she indicates that there is such a thing as 'God's word'—clear and simple 'God's rules'—regarding purity. In the group's discussion, purity rules centred exclusively on the sanctity of Christian marriage: sex belonged only in marriage, and a born-again believer's guiding rule was to avoid tempting anyone—themself included—to tarnish holy matrimony with pre- or extra-marital sex. Second, Faith observes that many non-married non-singles are unable to follow these rules, and end up, for instance, co-habiting

before marriage. Yet third, by arguing 'that there is no ring in the Bible'—the ring and the white wedding being the Pentecostal determinant of when marriage begins and sex is allowed— Faith brings doubt to the very claim that 'God's word' actually equates to the clear rules that the church claims it does (see e.g. Lugazia 2020: 335–8 for similar arguments).

Over the span of some months, Faith gradually revealed to Henni the messiness of her situation. The terminology she used to refer to Derrick belied her attempts to grapple with the in-betweenness of her relationship and navigate the Pentecostal rules of purity and of marriage that concerned it. Derrick, who was separated from his wife but not yet formally divorced, was alternately her 'friend', her 'boyfriend', her 'fiancé', and her 'husband', depending on what aspect of their relationship she was emphasising. Despite what the church taught about supposedly clear and uniform rules, even those who publicly presented themselves as born-again believers who abided by 'God's word' were in fact constantly engaged in navigating rules within the confines of their own life situations. Only very rarely were situations as simple as the (purportedly) married and settled church leaders claimed life could be for God's people. Arguably, a God who 'spoke back' (Luhrmann 2012) allowed believers to resolve some of the tension that resulted from this mismatch between ideal and reality. Faith, for instance, emphasised that it was not her church's or her pastor's view on relationship matters that mattered, but the very close bond she had with God, which she cared for by following strict self-imposed rules about Bible study and prayer.

The shifts in Faith's tone and reasoning— from affirming the Pentecostal rule of 'abstain and be faithful', to creating friction around the rule through statements of doubt—is characteristic of Pentecostal rulework. On the one hand, born-again Christians are called to present themselves as 'godly men and women', following the formal purity rules at the heart of their churches' self-understanding. On the other hand, very few Christians in contemporary Uganda can actually attain the pinnacle of the born-again vision for godly sexuality: Christian marriage (Christiansen 2009; see Alava 2017; Baral et al. 2021). Subsequently, in churches like the one discussed in this case, most church-goers occupy the 'in-between' space between being single and being married for which the church's rules of abstinence are widely considered impractical. For those 'in-between', rules thus shift between being a means of condemnation (of self and others) and a means of aspiration.

TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RELATIONAL RULEWORK

In the two cases presented above, rulework around Pentecostal purity rules played out very differently and had drastically different consequences. In the case of Bob and Stella, the purity rule governing non-married couples— abstain from sex—was transgressed, and the couple was punished with expulsion from their congregation. In the case of Faith, it is not exactly clear whether the abstinence rule was transgressed, as Faith's remarks about the question were somewhat contradictory and opaque, and there were no visible consequences of this (possible) transgression. In order to gain deeper understanding of what rulework is—what rules do, and what people do with rules—we now consider the cases comparatively, through the prism of the interrelated axes of relational rulework—hierarchy, publicity of revelation, and relationship to God—and the centring of these axes in the believers' body. The

comparison shows that rules, as things that *do something* in the world, and that people *do things with*, are, in themselves relational and contextual.

The case of Faith illustrates what we claim is a typical scenario in Ugandan Pentecostalism: purity rules are navigated in born-again believers' everyday lives in ways that at times appear deft, at other times fraught with doubt, and, often, shame. Faith's account of her choices highlights that the ultimate source of rules for her is God, with whom she has an intimate personal relationship and is in constant communication. She is thus assured that she can trust her moral compass, and nothing in her moral compass suggests to her that a rule is being broken, although, in group conversations, she pushes against strict interpretations of the rules, suggesting that she perhaps does, on some level, acknowledge the conflict. Indeed, Faith's case highlights how rulework occurs through the careful gauging of the relations within which questionable choices, and possible rule-breaking, are revealed to others. And Faith opts for *not* revealing: she keeps her choices very close, revealing them (in a rather opaque way) only to an anthropologist 'outside' of the moral community of the church. Faith's position at the bottom of the church hierarchy also enables her to do just this: because her (possible) transgression is visible to no-one it is possible for her to assess the rule in privacy and keep her choices regarding how she follows it to herself. In contrast, the dimensions of rulework play out very differently for Bob and Stella. First of all, Bob is high up in the church hierarchy, and thus holds a particular authority and responsibility to uphold rules and the sense that rules matter. Secondly, by confessing in the public Sunday service without forewarning the church leaders, the couple bring their confession out to the most public of church arenas in a manner that is highly disruptive to the church's public image.

Finally, they are forced to make the confession because their rule-breaking would, in due time, have become blatantly visible in Stella's pregnant body.

Faith chooses not to reveal her situation to other group members, and rather keeps it between her and God. In her interactions with the small group, she is thus able to go back and forth between statements that emphasise 'ruliness' and others focused on 'messiness'. Instead, for Bob and Stella, the visibility of their transgression, combined with Bob's leadership role in the congregation, leads to the outcome being defined less by the couples' relationship to God, and rather by relationships within the church, and the church's need to maintain its image as a community where rules really matter. As Clarke and Corran have noted (2021: 10), the 'distinctions between private and public transgression… are neither timeless nor ethnographically neutral.' Read beside each other, the two cases show that whether rules function to support one's aspirations, such as towards 'godly womanhood', or whether their core function is to judge and possibly punish, depends on the social context and the web of relations in which rulework takes place, and on the degree to which the set of relations allows for the 'messiness' of everyday morality to be acknowledged. This is also apparent in comparing the two 'Heavenly tastes' groups Henni attended. In one, purity rules were used as a measure against which some women were judged as 'ungodly', whereas in the other, rules seemed to provide women with a tool for navigating messy life situations, including the disappointments they had experienced in marriages and relationships, despite their aspirations to be 'godly'.

What's in the apparent mismatch between the aspiration for godliness through the following of rules and the 'messiness' of

life? Does it constitute a failure to stay firm in moral convictions? Or a double moral standard perhaps? In the 'doppia morale' in Italian Catholicism, according to Paolo Heywood (2015), people can transgress religious norms in their private life as long as this does not affect their public life. Is this a pragmatic or opportunistic way of negotiating with religious rules? We follow here the suggestion by Clarke and Corran (2021: 18) to conceive of rules as a 'ubiquitous ethical form, but one that in itself provokes dilemma, and thus moral reflection'. Indeed, there seems to be a reflective process in what Faith says about her relationship, something that is activated by the discussion held within the women's group at church: 'What is purity for someone who is a single parent? Like can someone not be wanting to have sex, and be normal?' This questioning is revealing. She does not rebel against the concept of 'purity' in itself; rather, she raises doubts about the understanding of 'purity' that the group proposes.

It seems that there is an interesting and fundamental paradox about adhering to rules in Pentecostal morality: following rules is only possible through God. Yet simultaneously, more than anything, adhering to rules is about the choices one makes, about learning and practising the proper techniques of the self: guarding one's heart, eyes and mouth, and surrounding oneself with people, teachings, media, and music that help keep the door closed to the Devil. There seems to be something of a dynamic tension here, one with which the other axes of the individual's relationships (to small groups, and the church) intersect.

An analysis of the complexities of rulework can thus extend ongoing conversations in the anthropology of morality and ethics. In the work of James Laidlaw (2002) and Jarrett Zigon (2007), moral reasoning is seen as prevailing over moral dictates in specific circumstances. Similarly, writing about Pentecostal deliberations over appropriate spiritual practice in Ghana, Daswani argues that '[j]udgement and moral evaluation of practice play a central role in the life of a committed Pentecostal Christian, a role they could not have in the life of one who merely follows rules and obeys laws' (Daswani 2013: 476). From these perspectives, rules are not overwhelming (as Durkheim had it), which explains why individuals and groups are able to work with rules, go beyond them and their simple reproduction, especially in what Zigon refers to as 'moments of moral breakdown' that activate reflexivity. This is an understanding of morality in which – as Laidlaw claims – there is room for freedom and for non-adherence to rules. Vitally, we claim, this idea of freedom should not be understood in the Western terms of individual freedom, but rather as a situation in which choice is defined within the limits that culture sets. Yet, as Robbins shows, some moral systems define 'moral' as action that reproduces and conforms to the norm, rather than as action that goes beyond the norm and changes it. In such systems, moral action thus consists of submitting to a rule (Robbins 2007).

Anthropologists of Islam have explained in a similar way the process of self-cultivation, and the forms of subjectivity that derive from it. In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood (2011) explicitly questions the idea that religious behaviours (here, Muslim Egyptian women's submission to God and forms of piety) have to be analysed through the lens of economic and structural conditions, and not in terms of their religious meaning per se. According to Mahmood, anthropological interpretations of religious rules and the way people interact with them rest—often unconsciously—on a liberal view of the individual as an autonomous subject who acts according to her own desires and benefits.

This idea of the autonomous subject as a natural status for human beings creates a fracture between the social sphere and the individual, positing that believers are autonomous in choosing how to negotiate with religious rules, and act strategically to keep the private sphere cordoned off from the public. This perspective also rests on the modernist and eurocentric conception of religion, and on the attitude that considers respect for religious obligations and practices (as distinct from beliefs) as a sign of backwardness (Asad 1993). As Mahmood (2011) shows, this eurocentric view posits the religious individual's agency as ideally taking the shape of resistance to or negotiation of religious rules, leaving little space for alternative understandings of what religious rules do and mean for adherents (see Clarke, this issue). The notion of relational rulework, which we have sought to foreground in this article's analysis, helps highlight that there is more to rules than the polar extremes of submission and dismissal.

To close, we wish to make two interrelated points. The first is that regardless of what rules are on paper, in formal church rules, or guidebooks, they are never 'set in stone'. Rather, rules are the subject of constant (re)interpretation: by theologians, by faith communities, by individuals, and most importantly, *in the relations between*. As Clarke and Corran (2021: 2) have highlighted, the emphasis on ethics and virtue in anthropology has falsely conceived of rules as strict codes that are 'either followed blindly or entirely ignored'. Our analysis of relational rulework in Ugandan Pentecostalism illustrates their argument that rules can, on the contrary, be complementary with virtue, and part of what Daswani (2013) refers to as ethical practice. Indeed, whereas Daswani argues Pentecostal believers' choices to be determined *more* by their relationships with others than by 'regulatory rules' (Daswani 2013:

474), the notion of relational rulework allows us to step beyond considering whether behaviour is determined more by relationships or by rules to a focus on their interrelatedness. As the case studies we have analysed in this article show, the process through which people grapple with rules and make decisions concerning their actions— what we refer to as relational rulework—is characterised by ambivalence (Daswani 2015), and contradiction (Schielke 2009). As Samuli Schielke (2009: 165) writes in the context of Islamic da'wa:

> this is not simply an issue of people falling short of the ideals they hold to, of the project of da'wa getting stuck on the level of rational ideology and failing to become part of people's dispositions. Because revivalist piety exists in competition with other aims, it becomes the cause of contradictions, and because it is part of a complex life, it becomes an element of compromises and syntheses that depart from the declared aims of its proponents.

Indeed, by highlighting ambiguity and contradiction, the notion of 'rulework' offers analytical insight for extending debates within the anthropology of ethics and morality—a point elaborated further in the Introduction to this special issue (Alava, Clarke, Gusman this issue). Approaching rules as objects of anthropological analysis foregrounds that 'ruliness' and 'messiness' are not each other's opposites, but rather exist in parallel with each other. Where a religious tradition's ruliness interacts with the messiness of adherents' everyday lives is where rulework happens, and where rulework can most productively be ethnographically observed.

Second, a focus on relationality and interpretation in rulework highlights the way in

which religious communities and their teachings are socially and politically embedded (Alava 2022)—as are religious rules. For instance, in the cases we discuss, the context—Uganda under and in the wake of the AIDS pandemic—is fundamental for understanding the way in which rulework on purity rules takes place in Ugandan churches. Particularly in the case of Bob and Stella, to understand the weight that the church put on their transgression, it is necessary to recall Uganda's 'abstinence campaign' and the role evangelical groups played in spearheading national healthcare policies, ones that were influenced by transnational connections, international funding, and religiously motivated lobby groups (Beckmann, Gusman and Shroff 2014). The rule 'abstain from sex until marriage' was thus not only God's will for the purity of his children, but also part of a far broader, national and even global, landscape of moral and religious rulework. Acknowledgement of these broader contexts allows analysis of rulework to extend beyond particular cases and religious communities. Indeed, if, as Sylvia Tamale (2014) has argued, religion coalesces with culture and law to enforce structures of capitalist patriarchy and state domination, an analysis of religious rulework should extend to how rulework is imbricated in these broader terrains. That said, there is also value in grounding such analysis in concrete ethnographic circumstances. As the above case studies show, many Ugandan Pentecostal churches put emphasis on purity rules in ways that make them appear far more 'ruly' than their competitors on the Ugandan religious marketplace. At the same time – as we have shown—even in these highly 'ruly' communities there is room for rules to be worked upon by individual believers and groups, within the context of the sheer messiness of everyday life.

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NOTES

1 The author's affiliation changed to Tampere University during the publication process, but the research and writing work were done while she was employed by the University of Jyväskylä.
2 All the names of individuals and churches used in the article are pseudonyms. The analysis is based on the authors' collaborative analysis of the ethnographic fieldwork they have conducted at urban Pentecostal churches in Central Uganda. The first case study draws from Alessandro's altogether 18 months of fieldwork in various Pentecostal churches between 2007 and 2015, while the second case study builds on Henni's 5 months of fieldwork in a Pentecostal congregation in 2019. In this article we focus on two English-speaking churches that we name 'God Saves' and 'Blessed Assurance'. Ethnographic descriptions from 'Blessed Assurance' rely on fieldwork the authors conducted at different times at two different branches of the same church.

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